

Rural Plains *Near Mechanicsville*  
Hanover County, Virginia

VA-753

HABS

VA

43-MECHA.V,

4-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Eugene Bradbury, District Officer  
210 East Franklin Street, Richmond, Va.

ADDENDUM TO:  
RURAL PLAINS  
7273 Studley Road (State Route 606)  
Richmond National Battlefield Park  
Hanover County  
Virginia

HABS VA-753  
*VA,43-MECHA.V,4-*

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### Addendum to RURAL PLAINS

HABS No. VA-753

**Location:** 7273 Studley Road (State Route 606), Mechanicsville, Hanover County, Virginia.

The Shelton House known as Rural Plains is located at latitude: -77.3472625971, longitude: 37.66055756696. The coordinate was taken near the front door, in 2004, using a GPS mapping grade unit accurate to +/- 1 meter after differential correction. The coordinate's datum is North American NAD 1927. Rural Plains's location has no restriction on its release to the public.

**Present**

**Owners:** 124 acres, including both the eighteenth-century Shelton dwelling known as Rural Plains and Civil War-era earthworks, were conveyed from the Totopotomoy Battlefield at Rural Plains Foundation to Richmond National Battlefield Park, a unit of the National Park Service, in 2006. The Foundation purchased the property from William R. Shelton, Jr., in 2001.<sup>1</sup>

**Significance:**<sup>2</sup> Few houses in Hanover County can claim a more distinguished history than Rural Plains. It was there, for example, in 1754 that Patrick Henry wed Sarah Shelton. Over a hundred years later, in 1864, Civil War armies clashed nearby in what would be a preliminary to the bloody action at Cold Harbor. Union Major General Winfield S. Hancock established his headquarters in the house, while the women and children of the Shelton family took refuge in the basement. A signal station on the roof of the house attracted the Confederate army's fire, and 51 artillery shells hit the building on May 30 alone.

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<sup>1</sup>While the ownership synopsis was taken from the National Park Service website (see [www.nps.gov/rich/parknews/rural-plains-transfer.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/parknews/rural-plains-transfer.htm)), primary sources that support that information include the Hanover County Deed Book 1618, 416-19, for Shelton's conveyance to the Totopotomoy Battlefield at Rural Plains Foundation, and Hanover County Deed Book 2681, 80-81, for the conveyance to the Park.

<sup>2</sup>Significance statement was taken from the National Park Service website. See [www.nps.gov/rich/parknews/rural-plains-transfer.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/parknews/rural-plains-transfer.htm). Architectural historians, however, will appreciate this house for what it reveals about early Virginia architecture and for the questions its unusual features raise in addition to the site's importance in social and military history.

Multiple generations of the Shelton family lived at Rural Plains.<sup>3</sup> The last of the Shelton family to occupy the house, William R. Shelton, Jr., died on May 5, 2006. Many of the original furnishings that were present during the 1864 battle were purchased by the National Park Service and will remain with the house.

Rural Plains is listed on both the Virginia Landmarks register and the National Register of Historic Places. It is also listed on the Virginia Farm Bureau Bicentennial Farm Register.

**Description:** The house is a story and a half building covered with a gambrel roof that is punctuated by dormer windows. The front facade is five bays across, reflective of the two-room deep, central hall floor plan inside. The exterior walls are load-bearing, made of bricks laid in a Flemish bond pattern above and below the beveled water table. Glazed headers, as well as the rubbed bricks placed in the jack arches and jambs of the first-floor windows and on the corners, provide ornamentation that is both structural and decorative in nature. The appearance of Flemish bond with glazed headers in dwellings of early Virginia was an indication of the builders' wealth

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, the deeds registered in Hanover County as well as various will books and census records. John Shelton died in 1725, but had built a house by 1714 when the St. Paul's Parish vestry notes it met there. He disappeared from parish notes in 1719, likely as a result of the partitioning of Hanover County from New Kent in 1721. He owned land on the north side of Topopotamoy Creek by 1719, and patented two other parcels in 1723 (1198 acres) and 1725 (400 acres). It is likely then that his wife saw the construction of the dwelling known as Rural Plains through to completion. Their grandson John (died in 1799), the son of John (1713-before 1770) and Eleanor the daughter of *Virginia Gazette* printer William Parks, posted a notice offering the parcel for sale in 1777. It contained 600 acres and a "commodious brick dwelling-house with four rooms and a passage on the first floor, and the same above stairs and in the cellar, with all convenient outhouses necessary for a family,..." Evidently there was not a buyer, for his uncle Joseph left him in ownership of the tract in 1784. John's second wife, Ann Barrett Southall, lived until 1830, and their son Edwin inherited the property and was living there by the 1840 census. *Vestry Book of St. Paul's Parish, Hanover County, 1706-1786* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives), 64, 224, 236, 242, 254, 262; Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1979), III: 214 [Patent Book 10, 435], 249 [Patent Book 11, 232], 286 [Patent Book 12, 245]; Hanover County Record Book 1733-35, 193; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie) 19 September 1777, 2; Louisa County Will Book 3, 29-31; Hanover County Land Tax Records, 1834-40; Federal Census Schedule, 1840. For the complete chain of title, see Camille Wells and Michael Blaakman, "Rural Plains Chain of Title," Report prepared for Richmond National Battlefield Park, May-August 2007, with additions by Wells in 2008; and Victoria Toms, "Brief Genealogy of the Shelton House of Rural Plains, Hanover County, Virginia," Report prepared for Richmond National Battlefield Park, August 2005, with revisions, May 2006. Thank you to Camille Wells for sharing a copy of the 2007 report, and to Cynthia McLeod for sharing Toms's genealogical data.

and taste, a choice that proliferated until the mid eighteenth century. Also throughout the gable end walls are putlog holes, remnants of the scaffolding system used to construct the building. There are two interior end chimneys; corner fireplaces heat the rooms inside. Rafters, visible in the attic, are painted with a linseed oil, much as was done for outbuildings in an effort to preserve the wood members against the weather.

While the rear, wood-frame porch is a later addition, the house always had a front porch that supported a small chamber above. The porch chamber is integral to the house, evidenced by the framing, and it is possible that the first-floor porch was enclosed originally given the presence of beaded boards and tapered columns.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the porch and porch chamber room arrangement was an early attempt by colonial Virginians like the Sheltons to establish social distance, creating an intermediate space between the front door and the internal rooms of the hall and chamber wherein guests both invited and unexpected could be received without intruding on the family. This echoed, in part, the function of the central hall; Rural Plains is unusual in that it had both from the beginning.

Dendrochronological evidence indicates that Rural Plains was built between 1724 and 1726, with a renovation likely undertaken in 1784 to 1785.<sup>5</sup> Further changes to the interior were made in the nineteenth century, and early twentieth, with most of the interior trim dating to a nineteenth-century, Greek Revival update. Original woodwork is confined to the two and four panel doors, hung with HL hinges and secured with box locks (one lock remained in-situ at the time of the National Register nomination, another stored in the house).<sup>6</sup>

**Sources:** Cook, Dr. Edward R., William J. Callahan, Jr., and Dr. Camille Wells. "Dendrochronological Analysis of *Rural Plains*, Mechanicsville, Hanover County, Virginia." Report prepared for Richmond National Battlefield Park, 2007.

"Rural Plains." Nomination, 1975. National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service.

Wells, Camille and Michael Blaakman. "Rural Plains Chain of Title," Report prepared for Richmond National Battlefield Park, May-August 2007, with additions

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<sup>4</sup>Site visit, 2007; Cynthia McLeod to Virginia B. Price, personal communication, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Cook, Callahan, and Wells, 3.

<sup>6</sup>"Rural Plains," Nomination 1975, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, section 7, p. 1.

by Wells in 2008.

Toms, Victoria. "Brief Genealogy of the Shelton House of Rural Plains, Hanover County, Virginia," Report for Richmond National Battlefield Park, August 2005, with revisions, May 2006.

**Historian:** Virginia B. Price, HABS Historian, 2008.

**Project**

**Information:** This summary is the result of a site visit and essential materials given to the author after a conversation at the *Virginia Forum*, namely the floor plan drawn up by students participating in the National Institute of American History and Democracy (2007) field school under the direction of Carl R. Lounsbury, PhD, and the chain of title and dendrochronological analysis by Camille Wells, PhD. The field school students responsible for the floor plan were Michael Blaakman, Judge Glock, Chris R. Hansen, Casey D. Horna, Katy Lasdow, and Sarah Thomas.